

RTI Said to Pay Off in Gains for English-Learners



Reading specialist Alice Howard helps 1st grader Fernando Lugo, 6, with a reading exercise at Lillian J. Rice Elementary School in Chula Vista, Calif. The district is noted for its use of response to intervention techniques with English-language learners.
—Sandy Huffaker for Education Week

By **Mary Ann Zehr**

Chula Vista, Calif.

Fernando Lujo and Hector Martinez are only in 1st grade, but already educators at Lillian J. Rice Elementary School have mapped out different instructional paths for them.

A few months ago, both of the English-language learners had limited awareness of how to sound out words, according to a screening test. Fernando was assigned to an hourlong intensive reading “clinic” four days a week and was soon reading on grade level, so he graduated from the extra lessons last month. Hector was put in the reading clinic as well, but made only limited progress, so the school’s reading expert now meets with him one-on-one for a half-hour four days a week.

Educators here in the Chula Vista Elementary School District determined what kind of instruction the boys needed through a “response to intervention” process, which provides extra help to struggling students with an aim of reducing the number of referrals to special education.

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An advertisement for Will Campus. It features a green header with the text "Socially relevant, fully interactive video games for teens". Below this is a black banner with the text "VIDEO GAMES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE". Under the banner are four small portrait photos of diverse teenagers. At the bottom, the "WILL CAMPUS" logo is on the left, and the text "CLICK HERE TO LEARN MORE" is on the right.

As RTI catches on throughout the country, the district is on the cutting edge in its focus on how the approach applies to English-language learners, who make up 36 percent of the K-6 district's 27,450 students.

"As part of every conversation, [the discussion] is about: How do we support our largest target group, English-language learners?" said John M. Nelson III, the district's assistant superintendent for instructional services.

Chula Vista started using RTI during the 2004-05 school year. In the 2006-07 school year, it hired Douglas Fisher, a professor of teacher education at San Diego State University, as a consultant to focus on how to apply RTI to students who don't have a command of English. Mr. Fisher is one of a small number of researchers looking closely at the overlap between response to intervention and techniques for teaching ELLs. Others are Jana Echevarria, a special education professor emerita at California State University-Long Beach, and Sharon Vaughn, a special education professor at the University of Texas at Austin

Mr. Fisher and Mr. Nelson say response to intervention has helped the district dramatically raise test scores in mathematics and reading for ELLs. In 2008, the California Association for Bilingual Education recognized the district with its "seal of excellence" award. For the past two years, the district has ranked high on California's academic performance index. It scored 833 on the state's growth accountability index in the 2008-09 school year, as 31 of its 44 schools exceeded the target of 800. In addition, the Chula Vista

Elementary district has never missed its state's goals for adequate yearly progress under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which is unusual for a district with so many students who aren't fluent in English.

Mr. Nelson said RTI addresses how to change teachers' thinking "from 'I taught it and it's their fault if they got it or not' to 'I need to keep teaching it and supporting students.' "

Increasing Intensity

The approach applies instruction with differing intensity, duration, and frequency for different students. Mr. Nelson said the district has accompanied the use of RTI with a push for data-based instruction and accountability. For example, he said, the district doesn't shy away from ranking schools according to the performance of their students on state academic tests and letting principals go who can't deliver good results.

In Chula Vista and across the country, response to intervention provides instructional triage with three "tiers." All students receive Tier 1 instruction, in which teachers ideally take into account the individual needs of students in their regular instruction. In Tier 2, a subset of students who need additional help receives interventions in small groups, which in Chula Vista are provided by teachers in regular classrooms and while students are pulled out of class, such



as for the reading clinic at Rice Elementary. Lastly, some students are identified for Tier 3; they receive even more intensive help, such as daily one-on-one instruction, as is the case with Hector Martinez.

In many school districts, Tier 3 equals special education. In Chula Vista, that is true for some students who aren't ELLs. Mr. Nelson said, however, that schools are urged to wait until after Tier 3 intervention has been tried before referring an English-learner for special education evaluation. He said educators need to ensure they aren't mistaking a language barrier as a disability.

Mr. Fisher said the most impressive changes in the Chula Vista district have occurred with improving the quality of core instruction, or Tier 1 instruction, to meet the needs of ELLs.

"RTI reminds us," Mr. Fisher said, "that the big bulk of the day has to work with the majority of kids." He added, "You can't take a school with 400 kids and have 100 in intervention."

Ms. Echevarria agrees that it's essential for educators nationwide to improve general classroom instruction for English-learners as part of the RTI process.

"I find they are really focusing on Tier 2, rather than fully examining every day what's happening in their general classroom for all students, and making sure there are some modifications in the classroom before we even refer students to Tier 2," she said. Techniques that help ELLs, she said, are repetition, using visuals, and providing chances for student interaction.

Mr. Fisher said Chula Vista has also done a good job carrying out supplemental intervention, or Tier 2 instruction, for ELLs. But he added that the district isn't yet a model in providing Tier 3 instruction, partly because schools are struggling to figure out how to pay for its very intensive instruction.

Currently, 11 percent of students in the district are identified as having disabilities, about the same as the national average. The percentage of English-language learners who are in special education has changed little over the past three years, decreasing from 39.5 percent in 2007 to 38.8 percent in 2009, and still hovering about 3 percentage points above the percentage of all students in the district who are ELLs.

Language Instruction

Teaching language through academic content is a big part of schooling here. Some of the methods were promoted by Mr. Fisher of San Diego State University in the workshops he gave to school teams of Chula Vista educators for each of the past two school years.

One of the strategies is giving students a "sentence frame," or structure for speaking or writing.



A student works on a word recognition game during a Tier 2, 1st grade class on Wednesday, December 16, 2009 at Lilian J. Rice Elementary in Chula Vista, CA. Rice is the head of a Response to Intervention Class which helps English learners become proficient in reading.

—Sandy Huffaker for Education Week

Once students are comfortable with a structure, teachers take away the prop.

On a recent winter day, Esther de Baca, a 1st grade teacher at J. Calvin Lauderbach Elementary School, handed students a written copy of this sentence frame: "The ____ lives in a ____." The lesson was about the homes of animals or birds. In pairs, youngsters practiced making up sentences such as "The sheep live in a barn" and "The monkey lives in a tree" before sharing sentences with the whole class. It wasn't easy for some English-learners to come up with correct sentences. One said, for example, "The sheeps live in a barn."

In other classrooms, some teachers were providing Tier 2 intervention by teaching to small groups. At Rice Elementary, for example, a 3rd grade teacher worked with a group of six ELLs to help them understand math terms while the rest of her students worked on an assigned activity.

Emiko Nakamura, the principal of Rice, has worked out a plan to provide additional Tier 2 and Tier 3 instruction other than what teachers offer in the regular classroom. That's the role of the reading clinic.

Fernando and Hector were among the 20 1st graders and 17 2nd graders to participate in Rice's first reading clinic.

Seventeen weeks of the intensive small-group lessons were enough to enable Fernando to learn to read.

"He started putting the pieces together," said Alice Howard, the school's RTI specialist and reading expert, "and before we knew it, he was reading fluently."

In the reading clinic, students move through several stations guided by an educator, each focusing on a different reading skill, such as fluency or understanding whole stories.

It was evident during a recent lesson that Fernando still lacked some of the background knowledge he needs to understand everything he is reading, which is typical of English-learners. Forty-four percent of the school's 700 students are ELLs. In a review exercise, Fernando read aloud a list of one-syllable vocabulary words, including the word "tub."

"Do you know what 'tub' is?" Niki Morehead, a special education teacher, asked. Fernando was silent and shrugged. The teacher drew a bathtub and also an example of a tub that was bucket-shaped.

Even though Fernando left the clinic, Ms. Howard said she'll continue to monitor his progress.

During her one-on-one time with Hector offering Tier 3 intervention, Ms. Howard built on what Hector already can do. She knows, for instance, that he can recognize some simple words, and can name four of the letters in his name.

She asked Hector to read sentences that have the same pattern from a picture book: "Mom is driving." "Dad is cooking." But when he got to "Mom is sleeping," he read it as, "Mom is asleep."

Ms. Howard tried to help Hector hear the "a" sound in the word "asleep" and asked him if the word "sleeping" has an "a." He didn't answer. She turned the page and tried to help him

recognize "ing" in "cooking." She had him frame "ing" with two fingers.

But when she returned to the sentence about Mom, Hector still read "asleep" instead of "sleeping." He also read "asleep" instead of "sleeping" in the sentence, "Dad is sleeping."

"Did you see the 'ing' chunk?" asked Ms. Howard.

He repeated "sleeping" after her but didn't read the word correctly on his own.

She wrote out a sentence, "Hector is sleeping," and asked Hector to trace the length of each word from left to right with his finger. He read, "Hector is asleep." She made the sentence with plastic letters and he still read, "Hector is asleep."

The half-hour session was soon up. "I need you to know 'sleeping,' " Ms. Howard said finally.

If Hector in fact has a learning disability, because of RTI, Rice Elementary has considerable documentation about his progress or lack of progress that will inform any further evaluation.

Ms. Nakamura says RTI permits her teachers to determine what kind of instruction children need.

"Our mantra is to catch them before they fall," she said.